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ABSTRACT

Listening to an intimate self-diclosure does not always generate attraction for the revealer. One factor which may influence the relationship between disclosure and attraction is emotional empathy (i.e, an observer's reacting emotionally because he/she perceives that another is experiencing an emotion). To investigate whether emotional empathy on the part of the listener would increase the effect of a negative, intimate self-disclosure on attraction to the revealer, female undergraduates (N=86) were assigned in equal numbers to the eight manipulated conditions of a 2 (perceptual set) by 2 (intimacy) by 2 (responsibility) design. In groups of two, the subjects were assigned a list of 15 self-description topics. Subjects watching their partner's self-description actually saw one of four videotapes in which the confederate's disclosure varied in intimacy level, or in level of responsibility. Following the videotaped disclosure, subjects completed a mood, and an impression questionnaire. The multiple regression design used for analysis included empathy as a dispositional trait, empathy as a manipulated perceptual set, intimacy-level of the disclosure, and responsibility for the disclosed event as predictors. Results showed that dispositional empathy was associated with greater differences in perceived intimacy, and a tendency to interpret disclosures as an indicator of attraction from the revealer. Dispositional empathy was not associated with greater attraction to the revealer, and perceptual set had no effect on perceptions. (WAS)

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THE EFFECTS OF EMPATHY ON PERCEPTIONS OF A SELF-DISCLOSER

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The Effects of Empathy on Perceptions of a Self-Discloser

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Abstract

This study investigated whether emotional empathy on the part of a listener, as a measured disposition or a manipulated perceptual set, would increase the effect of a negative intimate self-disclosure on attraction to a revealer. In addition to empathy as a trait and a state and intimacy of the disclosure the multiple regression design included responsibility for the event disclosed as a predictor. As predicted, dispositional empathy was associated with greater differences in perceived intimacy and a tendency to interpret them as an indicator of attraction from the revealer. Dispositional empathy was not associated, however, with greater attraction to the revealer as expected and perceptual set failed to affect perceptions at all.

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Listening to an intimate self-disclosure does not always generate attraction for the revealer (see Archer, 1979; and Kleinke, 1979, for recent reviews.) Previous investigators have identified a number of variables that mediate the relationship between disclosure and attraction. The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the influence of yet another factor, emotional empathy.

Emotional empathy has been defined as "an observer's reacting emotionally because he perceives that another is experiencing or is about to experience an emotion" (original italics, Stotland, Sherman & Shaver, 1971, p. 2). It has been investigated both as an enduring personality trait tapped by an individual difference measure (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) and as a state induced by establishing a perceptual set (Stotland et al., 1971). In both lines of research the person with whom the observer empathizes is usually a victim of some sort and his or her emotional experience is a negative one. The observer who vicariously shares in the victim's misfortune in these experiments responds sympathetically, attributing causality more like the victim (an actor) would (Regan & Totten, 1975) and evaluating the victim more favorably (Aderman, Brehm, & Katz, 1974).

Since intimate self-disclosures frequently involve the revelation of more negative experiences, facts, and events (especially in laboratory experiments, see Archer, 1979), emotional empathy on the part of the listener may have important consequences. First of all, by taking his or her own vicarious emotions as a benchmark, the empathizing listener might perceive a greater contrast between intimate and superficial disclosures. But more importantly, by imagining him- or herself in the position of the discloser the empathizing listener may also be inclined to interpret the negative information in a sympathetic light and to view the disclosure of that information as a sign of liking from the revealer. It is difficult not to like someone that likes you (Heider, 1959), and if the impact of the negative information is also softened, then emotional empathy might strongly boost the relationship between intimate disclosure and attraction.

To test this hypothesis we designed a study in which both scores on a dispositional measure of empathy and a situational manipulation of empathy were

included. Subjects heard their confederate partner disclose either an intimate or a superficial negative experience for which either the partner herself or another was responsible. It was predicted that empathy, whether measured or manipulated, would be associated with: 1) stronger differences in perceived intimacy of the partner's disclosure, 2) a greater tendency to interpret intimate disclosure as an indicator of attraction from the partner, and 3) greater attraction to the intimate-partner. In addition, the partner's responsibility for the negative event was expected to exacerbate the differences between empathizing and non-empathizing subjects.

Method

Subjects

Eighty-six female undergraduates from the introductory psychology classes at the University of Texas at Austin participated in the study for course credit. They were assigned in equal numbers to the eight manipulated conditions of the 2(perceptual set) x 2(intimacy) x 2(responsibility) design by a randomized blocks procedure. During the study six women (from five of the eight manipulated conditions) expressed suspicion concerning the confederate's disclosure. Their data were eliminated and replaced so that there were 80 subjectsin the analyses.

Procedure

The female experimenter introduced the two subjects, one of whom was the confederate, and noted that the study was concerned with the acquaintanceship process. She explained to them that "what we want each of you to do is to tell the other person about yourself...to try to give the other person some idea of what you are like." She showed them to a room with one desk and video monitor. Supposedly due to a shortage of video equipment the procedure required them to alternate in role of speaker and listener, with the speaker

installed in another room before the camera. A rigged drawing was held in which the confederate was always selected to be the first speaker. The experimenter gave both confederate and subject a list of 15 self-description topics covering the full range of intimacy from which they were each to choose three. Then she escorted the confederate out of the room, presumably to the camera room.

Perceptual set manipulation. When the experimenter returned she (blindly) handed the subject one of an alleged set of five varieties of typewritten "secret" viewing instructions to follow during the confederate's self-description. In fact, there were only two versions. In the imagine-self (empathy) condition, the instructions were to..."imagine how she feels as she talks to you..." while in the watch-her (control) condition they were to "...make careful observations of everything she does..." Then the video-monitor was turned on.

Intimacy and responsibility manipulations. As the subject watched the self-description she was actually seeing one of four videotapes. In all four the confederate discussed the same three topics. She followed an ascending order of intimacy beginning with her hobbies, moving to the kind of work she wanted to do, and finishing with the best friendship she ever had. The disclosures concerning hobbies and work were alike in all conditions and the disclosure concerning the friendship always involved an auto accident precipitated by drunk driving. But in the high intimacy condition the accident was a serious one ending in (similar, temporary) injury to both friends and irreparably damaging the relationship, while in the low intimacy condition little damage, no injury, and only a short-lived strain on the relationship resulted. In the responsible condition the confederate revealed that she was driving the car and her friend, the passenger, had tried to talk her out of

it, while in the not responsible condition their roles were reversed.

Dependent measures. After the confederate's videotaped disclosure ended the experimenter returned and administered a "mood questionnaire" followed by an "impression rating form." The mood questionnaire was composed of 14 adjectives each followed by an 11-point scale. Responses were summed to produce three indices: empathic concern (moved, softhearted, touched, warm, concerned, and compassionate), sad-personal distress (troubled, upset, anxious, and grieved), and angry-personal distress (perturbed, bothered, irritated, and disturbed) based on the factor analysis of these items conducted by Archer, Diaz-Loving, Gollwitzer, Davis, & Foushee (in press).

The impression questionnaire presented three items to form an attraction index, asking the subject how much she liked her partner, wished to get to know her better, and wanted to have her as a close friend. A similar set of three items, asking the subject to estimate how her partner felt about her were included to form a perceived partner attraction index. Then there were three items to form an index of subjects' perceptions of the partner's intimacy, asking how intimate, how open, and how revealing the self-description had been. All of the impression items employed 10-point scales.

Dispositional empathy measure. When the subject finished the two questionnaires she was informed that due to a scheduling error there would not be time for her to disclose to the confederate. She was escorted by the experimenter to another room where the Mehrabian-Epstein (1972) dispositional empathy measure was administered. Then she was debriefed and excused.

Results

Analyses

The analyses performed used the simultaneous multiple regression program from the SPSS package (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, & Bent, 1975). The

continuous variable, dispositional empathy score, and the three dichotomous variables, perceptual set, intimacy, and responsibility condition, were the predictors. Simultaneous multiple regression and effect coding of the dichotomous variables were used as the best approximation of analysis of variance when cell n's are unequal (Carlson & Timm, 1974; Overall, Spiegel, & Cohen, 1975). Values of the continuous variable were coded in terms of their deviation from the mean to reduce the correlation between main effects and interaction terms (Althauser, 1971; Kenny, 1979). In any analysis in which a given predictor variable produced no main effects or interactions approaching significance ($p. > .10$) the sums of squares associated with it were pooled into the error term and the degrees of freedom recovered. Table 1 presents the means for each variable; changing n's reflect missing data.

Mood

The analysis of the empathic concern index yielded an intimacy main effect, $F(1,69) = 9.53$, $p < .003$, and a dispositional empathy by perceptual set interaction, $F(1,69) = 4.56$, $p < .04$. The high intimacy disclosure created more empathic concern than the low. Furthermore, the differences in empathic concern between subjects high and low in empathy present with the watch-her instructions (41.13 vs. 31.21) were muted by the imagine-self instructions (38.24 vs. 35.17).

Insert Table 1 about here

Analysis of the sad-personal distress index indicated main effects of dispositional empathy, $F(1,66) = 9.28$, $p < .003$, and intimacy, $F(1,66) = 8.19$, $p < .006$, and a marginal interaction between dispositional empathy, perceptual set, and responsibility, $F(1,66) = 3.54$, $p < .07$. Subjects who heard the high intimacy disclosure experienced more sadness than those who heard the

low intimacy disclosure and subjects who were high in empathy more than those who were low. In addition, with the imagine-self instructions subjects high in empathy were to some extent sadder when the discloser was responsible (20.91 vs. 12.86) while those low in empathy were less sad (7.11 vs. 15.00).

The angry-personal distress index analysis produced a dispositional empathy main effect, $F(1,68) = 4.55$, $p < .04$, a responsibility main effect, $F(1,68) = 9.07$, $p < .004$, and interactions between dispositional empathy and both intimacy, $F(1,68) = 3.93$, $p < .051$, and responsibility, $F(1,68) = 5.23$, $p < .03$. Both high empathy and responsibility increased anger, and in combination elevated anger so strongly that the interaction resulted. Low empathy on the other hand, in concert with the low intimacy disclosure, was associated with very little anger.

In general, the mood data indicate that dispositional empathy, much more than perceptual set was associated with vicarious emotions on the part of the listener. Intimate disclosure and the revealer's responsibility for the negative event disclosed, both alone and in concert with dispositional empathy, also magnified emotions.

Perceived Partner Intimacy

When the intimacy index was analyzed the intimacy variable showed a main effect, $F(1,74) = 26.13$, $p < .001$, and participated in an interaction with dispositional empathy, $F(1,74) = 4.57$, $p < .04$. Disclosure in the high intimacy condition was perceived as more intimate than the low intimacy condition, thus validating the manipulation. More importantly, and in accordance with predictions, among subjects higher in dispositional empathy, this difference was more pronounced. There were no effects involving the perceptual set.

Perceived Partner Attraction

The partner attraction index analysis yielded a dispositional empathy

main effect, $F(1,68) = 4.06$, $p < .05$, and interactions between dispositional empathy and intimacy, $F(1,68) = 9.37$, $p < .003$, and responsibility, $F(1,68) = 6.91$, $p < .02$. High empathy was associated with higher overall estimates of the partner's attraction. However, contrary to the prediction this difference was entirely due to the disclosure of the accident for which the revealer was not responsible. Consistent with the hypothesis, though, high intimacy disclosure was interpreted as an indicator of greater attraction by high empathy subjects, but not by low empathy subjects. Again, perceptual set had no impact.

Attraction

When the attraction index itself was subjected to analysis a main effect for dispositional empathy, $F(1,69) = 14.47$, $p < .001$, and an interaction between dispositional empathy and responsibility, $F(1.69) = 4.87$, $p < .04$, emerged. Corresponding with their elevated perceptions of the partner's attraction, high empathy subjects were themselves more attracted to the revealer overall than were low empathy subjects. Similarly, this difference was strongest when the revealer was not responsible for the accident. But there was no indication that high empathy subjects preferred the intimate discloser or that perceptual set influenced attraction at all.

Discussion

Taking stock of the findings from our study, it seems safest in light of previous results to assume our perceptual set manipulation failed for some reason. Subjects high in dispositional empathy are the ones who typically respond to such situational inducements (Archer, Foushee, Davis, & Aderman, 1979). Perhaps the compelling and immediate disclosure of the accident simply had an overwhelming effect on high empathy subjects causing them to disregard the instructions.

Dispositional empathy, on the other hand, was clearly associated with empathic responses to self-disclosure. High empathy subjects perceived greater differences in intimacy and interpreted them as attraction from the revealer as we expected. However, the intimacy of the disclosure did not affect their attraction to the revealer as predicted, though they did like the revealer better than low empathy subjects regardless of intimacy. Our hypotheses involving the responsibility variable were also disconfirmed. Rather than maximizing the effects of empathy it minimized them. A look at the means in Table 1 suggests that high rather than low empathy subjects were influenced negatively by the revealer's responsibility for the accident. Once again (see Archer et al., 1979; Archer et al., in press), high empathy is no assurance of unflagging sympathy.

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Table 1

Means by Experimental Condition for Subjects Above and Below the Mean on Dispositional Empathy

	High Empathy				Low Empathy			
	High Intimacy		Low Intimacy		High Intimacy		Low Intimacy	
Measure	Resp.	Not Resp.	Resp.	Not Resp.	Resp.	Not Resp.	Resp.	Not Resp.
Mood								
Empathic Concern	48.18(9)	43.42(11)	27.14(6)	33.91(11)	32.89(9)	34.25(8)	32.69(12)	31.78(9)
Sad-personal Distress	18.73(9)	15.42(11)	19.86(6)	10.55(11)	14.89(9)	16.00(8)	7.00(12)	7.56(9)
Angry-personal Distress	8.36(9)	6.25(11)	19.29(6)	2.82(11)	9.00(9)	8.88(8)	6.38(12)	4.11(9)
Perceived Intimacy	27.64(11)	26.00(12)	21.14(7)	21.73(11)	26.56(9)	24.13(8)	21.69(13)	22.33(9)
Perceived Partner Attraction	18.44(9)	20.82(11)	16.33(6)	17.27(11)	17.44(9)	16.50(8)	17.50(12)	18.00(9)
Attraction	23.36(9)	25.83(11)	23.71(6)	22.09(11)	22.44(9)	20.00(8)	22.38(12)	22.33(9)

The means are collapsed across the perceptual set variable. Numbers in parentheses are cell n's.